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study on the Wisdom literature and St Paul. He traces the development of Israelite wisdom from the family circle, through the scribes of the king to the scribes of the law of the Lord, and he emphasizes that life was transmitted at each stage. He carefully analyzes the relevant pauline texts, both those concerning birth to life in the Spirit and those concerning the growth of that life. Along the way, he offers helpful treatments of the nature of the wise man's 'counsel', aspects of 'education for life' according to the Old Testament and St Paul, the ways in which man is the origin and God is the origin of life in its various levels, the Word of God as life-giving. Particularly valuable is Briand's locating spiritual paternity/maternity within the wisdom tradition. He brings out the strong affinities with this tradition in contexts where Paul employs the terminology of spiritual parenthood. Despite this continuity, Briand discerns a leap from the sapiential paternity of the Old Testament to the spiritual paternity of the New. The life of union with God into which the two lead is significantly different. Unfortunately, Père Hervé's article became available to me only after I had completed my own.

15. Among the reasons our explorations have not yielded more satisfying results may be the following. By and large, the biblical writings are addressed to communities, if not to the whole people. The people of the Bible were less given to introversion and psychologizing than we. When there is a strong, supportive community, clear about its ideals and the basic means for achieving them, members feel less need for direction and support on a one-to-one basis. This may be a reaction against certain customs current in Jewish religion or pagan mystery cults. (The mystagogue who initiated newcomers into the mysteries was sometimes entitled 'father'.) A very great part was played by the father himself in the religious, moral, social upbringing of his children in a less sophisticated society. In the New Testament there is the overpowering sense that God was Father, alone capable of originating a life which was a share in his own. It is tantalizing that spiritual paternity draws its wherewithal so largely from the Scriptures, and can even be viewed as a mediation of the scriptural word, yet is not one of the key categories in which biblical thought flows.

SPIRITUAL FATHERHOOD IN THE LITERATURE OF THE DESERT

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WE CAN ALMOST SAY that the literature of the desert identifies itself with the exercise of spiritual fatherhood. The *Apophthegmata*, its master work, for example, is entirely constructed on a question-answer scheme, a monk asking an elder: 'Abba, tell me a word so that I may be saved.'

This form appears in written literature only on the eve of the fourth century, but its semitic aspect attests to a distant origin rooted in primitive Judaic-Christian traditions. *Abba* was kept as it was in Aramaic, though Coptic inflection changed its pronunciation to *apa*. The custom of naming 'father' whoever transmitted life in the Spirit was soon established among christian communities in spite of Jesus' admonition: 'Call no one on earth your father' (Mt 23:9). Moreover Jesus used the word himself in referring to those who had preceded his listeners in their faith in God: 'they are their fathers' (Lk 1:55; Jn 6:31, 49; 1 Cor 10:1). The expression had long been accepted when monastic tradition adopted it, and any reference to Mt 23:9—inspired by the desire to be free from one's father's tutelage—was immediately stigmatized as the fruit of diabolic illusion and an evident sign of pride. We recall here the sad account Palladius gives of a proud monk named Heron, 'filled with rebellious thoughts against the fathers' (*The Lausiac History*, 26, 1).¹ The fatherhood known to monastic tradition is not the one rejected by Jesus. Another was substituted for it, one entirely transparent to him, to the fatherly image he came to

earth to reflect.

Abba finds its synonym in 'old man' or 'elder', a biblical term which implies not age but rather a ministry of wisdom at the center of any christian community. (Ac 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 4, 6, 22; 20:17; 1 Tim 5:17; Tt 1:5; 1 P 5:17). In a well known instance the name became *kalogiros* or 'handsome elder', an epithet Pachomius used to greet the great Macarius, whom he had discovered hidden among the postulants of his monastery (*The Lausiac History*, 28, 6).

The questioner's aim is expressed by 'so that I may be saved' or 'so that I may live'. Here again the primitive aramaic idiom, which by one root expresses both concepts, is quite evident.

THE WORD

The object of the request is the *rhema* or 'word'. At first, questioners sought not a teaching, but rather an active word charged with mysterious power which, well received, touches the heart and opens a way by which new life may burst forth. Thus described, the *rhema* appears very close to the Word of God as we know it in the Bible. In the same way, the word of the fathers needs to be meditated on, that is, to be repeated over and over again within the heart, before it comes to fruition. By his word the true abba soon stands out among his brothers. He may be very young, as was Agathon, whom the great Poemen daringly called 'father' and then explained to his inquiring disciples: 'All that comes from his lips entitles him to that name' (Poemen, 61).²

A father's word is weighty. He does not speak idly. That is why he is listened to attentively and his word scrutinized: 'The fathers say nothing in vain, but everything they utter is for the salvation of the soul' (Barsanuphius, *Letter 652*).³ Even seemingly meaningless pronouncements must be respected as having a meaning which may escape us at first: 'If the fathers tell you that darkness is light, try to believe it is so; for they do not speak without God's approval' (Barsanuphius, *Letter 842*). The effectiveness of the fathers' word is

also considerable. It produces an undeniable effect even if we do not understand it, even if we forget it. A monk tempted to give up questioning his father, on the grounds that he keeps forgetting what he has learned, is instructed: 'Just as a jug filled regularly with water or oil is cleaner than one remaining empty, even if the liquids do not remain, so it is with the soul persevering in questioning the fathers even if the answers are forgotten' (*Anonymous Series*, 91).⁴ Though demons will exert themselves to sow seeds of trouble in the soul, inducing it to error as to what the fathers have said, the confusion will be only momentary, and in the end the power of the word will triumph: If you question the fathers and, even for a moment, demons trouble you with regard to their words, never stop your inquiry, for they ordain nothing that might be harmful or oppressive; the fathers are in fact disciples of him who said: 'My yoke is easy, and my burden light' (Mt 11:30). Later on we will discover the fruit of their assistance and exclaim with the Psalmist: 'You have changed my sorrow into joy'. (Ps 30:12).

The word's aim is not primarily to teach a precept or a method, moreover. Reduced to its simplest expression, it proclaims and grants salvation, and it does so with such a sovereign might that it seems to come from God himself. If the disciple asks the father questions in order to receive from him a saving word, the most direct answer he can hope for is to hear him proclaim salvation as if he were passing judgment: be saved! This very word John the Theban waited in vain to hear from his abba Ammoe as he nursed him patiently during his illness. At the time of his death, however, the elder rewarded his faithful disciple. He took his hand in the presence of all the other elders and pronounced three times the phrase which resounded like a verdict: 'Be saved, be saved, be saved . . . He is an angel, not a man' (John the Theban, 1).

This word, coming after a long wait, could not have been uttered without that waiting, for the word takes effect only to the extent to which it has been sought by the disciple with the proper attitude. The father's wisdom or experience is not

enough. The inner preparation of the disciple does much to release the word within his heart and on the father's lips. If the petitioner's intent is self-interest, the father remains silent. We recall a brother who badgered Abba Theodore for three days, hoping to obtain a *rhema*. The elder did not give it. When the importunate guest had left, Theodore explained to the disciple who lived with him: 'I did not speak, for he is a peddler seeking self-glory from someone else's speech' (Theodore of Pherme, 3). It is useless to seek any gain from the word except its inherent good. To do otherwise would reduce the word to naught.

If the intention of the petitioner is truly to know God's will, however, then somehow, somewhere, in the most unexpected manner, God will provide a father. Here is what Dorotheos of Gaza said to a brother who complained of not finding a sound spiritual father: If anyone truly seeks God's will with his whole heart, God will never abandon him but will guide him according to his will. Yes, it is true, if anyone directs his heart toward the divine will, God will enlighten even a little child to make his will known. But, if someone who does not sincerely seek God's will goes to consult a prophet, God will provide the prophet with an answer consistent with the perversity of the inquirer's heart' (Dorotheos of Gaza, *Discourses* 5, 68).⁵

This means that the charism of spiritual fatherhood dwells within the son's as well as the father's heart. If, at some time, the fathers have no more to say, this is, first of all, because there are no longer hearts disposed as sons to receive (Felix, 1). In approaching his father, a son will therefore pray God to enlighten his father, and he will surrender completely to the word of God which comes through his father's answer: 'If you go to ask a father questions about your thoughts, first pray to God and say: "Lord, put on the elder's lips what you will, so he may tell me. And I will receive from you, Lord, what will come from him. Strengthen him, Lord, in your truth so that I may learn, through him, your will"' (Nau, 592/58).⁶

The role of the father, answering, is formidable. From weakness and unworthiness he bends under the weight of the word he is to deliver, for he knows he has no sure grasp of the word. Witness John the Prophet's answer to a brother who insisted on getting advice: 'You write me again, senseless and ignorant as I am? . . . So I tell you the truth. I am nothing and know nothing. But out of obedience, I tell you what is in my heart. And I do not pretend that it is exactly so, but it is what I have. I tell . . . unworthy though I am' (Barsanuphius, 212).

The word of the fathers is not intended to dazzle the great and the wise of this world. It is rough and unwavering. It does not have polish. Abba Theodore of Pherme stood before a visiting count frankly and without artifice: 'His tunic was torn, his chest exposed, and his hood was hanging in front.' To his disciple who reproached him for his lack of decorum, Theodore gave the following answer: 'Are we still slaves of men? We have done what is necessary; the rest is superfluous. He who would be edified, let him be edified; he who would be scandalized, let him be scandalized. As for me, I meet people as I am.' The fathers' word does not need human affectation.

Thus, if the word is clear and rough, it has the advantage of brevity and needs to be followed by a silence as meaningful as the word itself. The truly enlightening word is self-sufficient; it has no need of prolix commentary. It would drown in a flow of words. When Abba Ammos went to church, he did not allow his disciple to walk near him, but kept him at some distance. Whenever the latter would come closer to question his father on his thoughts, Ammos would answer him and move away quickly, 'for fear that strange conversation slip in' (Ammos, 1).

The saving word springs forth from the depth of the rapport between father and son, at once rough and stripped down, yet very profound in faith. The two bring to dialogue the same lack of restraint, each at his own level. Each needs the other, the father the son as much as the son the father for

something to occur. Saint Anthony ends an exhortation to his sons by giving a definition, before its time, of the true spiritual dialogue: 'It is good to exhort one another mutually in faith and to become animated through discourses. You, my sons, bring to your father what you know; I, your elder, deliver you what experience has taught me' (*The Life of St Anthony*, 16).⁷ And as it is on both sides that giving and receiving take place, it is easy to understand Ammonas' words as he writes to a community of his disciples: 'Wherever the fathers receive their sons, God is present on both sides' (*Ammonas, Letter 6*, 2).⁸ The word shared in fraternal joy can only be God's Word.

BECOMING A FATHER

Through the fathers, God's word continues to echo in ears willing to ask them questions. Such inquiry, addressed by a younger member to one more experienced, is one of the fundamental observances of the desert. Dorotheos of Gaza has preserved for us a manuscript, still unpublished, attributed to the great Poemen: 'The fathers say that staying in a cell is half [of monastic observance], and to see the elders the other half' (Dorotheos of Gaza, *Letter 1*; see MS Paris grec, 1598, f^o 73). This is an indispensable guarantee against all forms of illusion entertained by secret pride. St Anthony and others after him call on a text of the Scripture borrowed from wisdom literature: 'I know monks who, after having borne many labors, fell into pride of the spirit because they placed their hope in their good works and neglected the precept of the one who said "Question your father and he will teach you" ' (Pr 4:1ff; Anthony, 37).

But how does one find a father according to God, and how does one become someday the father of one's brothers? We have already seen the essential attitudes expected of anyone looking for a father: a sincere desire to know God's will and the beginning of detachment from all selfish desire. He who will be chosen as father must not side with the disciple's desires. The anonymous series of apophthegmata has

preserved the story of a young man who addresses an elder thus: 'Abba, I would like to find an elder conformed to my will, and die with him.' The elder pretends to accept his request, but soon lets him know that the peace he seeks in this manner would be vain and superficial: 'Perhaps it is not for you to follow the elder's will, but for him to follow yours so that you may have peace' (*Anonymous Series*, 113).

Ordinarily, the father will not fall into such an obvious trap. He is supposed to be experienced in the ways of obedience. This, according to St John Cassian, is an absolutely indispensable condition. Gallic monasticism, for which Cassian composed his tales of monastic pilgrimage in the Near East, he reproached with being overcrowded with young abbots lacking experience, having acceded to their ministry without a chance to immerse themselves first in playing to its limit the role of disciple: 'Without the experience of the elders' teaching, we dare to take the first place in the monasteries, and, passing ourselves off as "abba" before having been disciples, we do as we please, more inclined to demand the observance we invented than to keep the doctrine tested by the elders' (*Instit.*, II, 3, 5).⁹ This attitude leads to the ruin of any tradition of rules faithfully transmitted. But the necessity of experience is even more true in the spiritual domain. The same John Cassian warns that one can teach the *scientia spiritualis* to others only to the degree of one's own learning, not by reading or studying, but by 'the sweat of experience' (*Coll.*, XIV, 17).¹⁰

This experience does not only come from exceptional graces. It first comes from a familiarity with temptation and trial. A father not himself purified by fire could easily lead others to despair (see *Anonymous Series*, 85). He would even be incapable of understanding the questions being asked. 'What you ask me,' writes Barsanuphius to one of his correspondents, no one can discern but the one who has reached in adequate level. The living man feels the warmth or coldness of objects presented to him, but a dead man has lost the ability to feel. So it is that we come to perfect knowledge

of letters by learning them; then we can distinguish them. But if they are not studied and effort is lacking, we cannot know their meaning even if we inquire and are told a thousand times what the letters are. So it is here: speak to someone as much as you wish; what is more necessary is the discernment of experience (Barsanuphius, 154).

Not every experienced monk is called to transmit his experience to another brother. Ancient texts imply a more direct manifestation of God's will concerning the new abbot. The most famous example is perhaps Abbot Zacharias. The first three apophthegms devoted to him allude to such an event, and we find it again slightly amplified in an apophthegm from the Ethiopian Collection (Zacharias, 1-3; *Eth. Coll.*, 14, 34).¹¹ Moses questions young Zacharias, who is still his disciple (in Zacharias, 1, it is Macarius); the latter asks why. The answers given by various texts are convergent. Moses, who questions one still his son, feels compelled to do so. 'Zacharias, my son, I am confident about you. It is God, in fact, who spurs me on.' Or better yet: 'Believe me, Zacharias, my son, I have seen the Holy Spirit come down upon you, and since then I am compelled to ask you questions.' This last confidence is confirmed by Apophthegm 2: 'Abba Moses, on his way to fetch water one day, found Abba Zacharias praying by the well and God's Spirit was over him.'

In other circumstances it is a saying, markedly enlightened, which reveals the true father: 'His tongue marks him as abba,' said Poemen of a very young monk (Poemen, 61). Or, more strikingly, a miracle reveals the spiritual quality of a brother previously held in contempt. Such is the case of the monk 'who took upon himself all the wrongs done by his brothers, going so far as to accuse himself of fornication'. But while the others are muttering, a miracle saves his work from fire and burns that of the others. 'On witnessing that,' continues the apophthegm, 'the brothers were afraid; they bowed profoundly to the brother and from then on looked upon him as a father' (Nau, 328).

Still more significant: a test patiently borne by the son

shows complete credence in the word pronounced by the father. Such was the case of Abba Joseph of Aframet, sent away by his abbot on a retreat of forty days in solitude after confessing a serious temptation against chastity. When he came back, calmed and joyous, his Abba kissed him several times on the lips and head and then said: 'Today you have become my son' (*Eth. Coll.*, 14, 27).

Is it necessary to add that no abba ever wishes to be one? In most instances a genuine terror seizes him when the offer is made. Witness again Abba Zacharias who, when asked his first spiritual question by Abba Moses, 'laid himself on the ground, beat his face on the earth, sprayed ashes over his head and cried' (*Eth. Coll.*, 14, 34)—expressive signs of grief and anguish.

UNVEILING THOUGHTS

We must now examine in depth the relationship which almost always began with a question on salvation. First let us take a closer look at the question itself. Its aim is very seldom of an abstract or theological nature, except on extremely rare occasions when the orthodox faith is in danger. Abba Joseph admits his ignorance when a difficult passage of the Scriptures is submitted to him (Anthony, 17), as does Abba Arsenius (Arsenius, 42). Abba Poemen advises against discussing the Scripture: it is better to discuss the elders' sentences (Amoun, 2), which proves that those elders did not venture often in this domain. Moreover, Poemen imposed this rule on himself. Questioned about the Scriptures, he turned away and remained silent. It was left to his disciples to explain to the disconcerted visitor: 'The elder does not speak willingly of the Scriptures, but if he is queried about the soul's passions he answers' (Poemen, 8).

The favorite topic for dialogue was indeed the passions and the sicknesses which affect the soul and which the elder's word must reveal and heal. Inasmuch as passions appear to the conscience as desires, they are called either *logismoi* (thoughts) or *thelēmata* (will, desires). A blasphemous thought

occurs to a brother who is ashamed to reveal it to his abba, Poemen. He tries to do so several times with no success: 'He left without having said anything to the elder.' Poemen, however, aware of his attitude and guessing the truth, encourages him to open up, all the while dispensing sound advice, and 'the devil, seeing his suggestion uncovered, left him, thanks to Christ's grace' (*Collection systématique grecque*, X, 63).¹² One of the aims of the unveiling of thoughts is the bringing to the surface of tendencies lurking deep in the heart where they cause havoc because they are not shared with anyone. Brought to light they often vanish. This is not, therefore, a confession of faults which might have been committed. It is no use to ask about a known weakness: 'Does he who knows he is losing his soul need to inquire? Hidden thoughts are to be questioned, and it is the elders' task to test them; as for visible flaws, there is need not to inquire but to remove them right away' (Poemen, 152).

'Thought' or *logismos* is to be understood here in a dynamic sense. It has nothing to do with any random thought coming to mind but rather a deep affective thought, seeking understanding from a heart which listens. After a question from one of his correspondents, the elder John makes the point: 'You must not inquire about all the thoughts springing from the heart, for many are transitory. But you must seek advice about the thoughts that remain within and war with man' (Barsanuphius, 165). It is not necessary to open up too quickly or on any subject whatever. God may give light directly, and Barsanuphius even gives criteria to help one decide for oneself if recourse to the spiritual father is needed: 'When something comes to your mind, pray to God three times on the matter, asking him that you may stay on the right road. If your thought remains unchanged, then do as it tells you, for it comes from God and not from you. If you are still not sure, question the fathers' (Barsanuphius, 841).

It is true that this advice was addressed to a layman, and we wonder if it would be as valid for a monk when we witness the insistence with which monks are sent out by a spiritual

father to seek discernment. The more exceptional the asceticism, the more perilous it is and the more it must be shared with an elder. This fact is verified by eremitic whimsy: 'A brother found a spot in the desert for a quiet retreat. He begged his father: "Order me to live there, and I hope that thanks to God and to your prayers I will practice mortification." His abba, however, would not allow it and said: "I know very well that you would mortify yourself, but, without an elder, you would put your trust in your own works, convinced that they are pleasing to God, and because of this confidence in your own work as a monk you would lose your caution and your reason" ' (Nau, 370). St Anthony had already remarked: 'Some have crushed their body through asceticism, but for lack of discernment, have become estranged from God' (Anthony, 8).

Discernment or acuteness of judgment, even in the humblest details, is necessary for the monk. Adds Anthony: 'In the measure it is possible, the monk must tell the elders the number of steps he walks in his cell and the number of drops of water he drinks to learn if, in so doing, he is mistaken' (Anthony, 38).

Demons' ruses creep in everywhere, as water seeps into a boat through the slightest crack and eventually sinks it. The spiritual father must be a vigilant captain, recommends the great Macarius, who left us this vivid image: 'The pilot is never free of worry for his craft; he examines its joints to see which ones let the water in . . . So it is with him who is father over his brothers; he must always examine all the passions and evil thoughts within to determine which one . . . lets bad water into the soul, for fear . . . there would be danger and just complaint before God should the brothers be swallowed by the sea because he has not examined them' (Amélineau, 189, 6).¹³

Here it would be appropriate to paraphrase the long apophthegm of Nau 641. It tells the story of a monk from the Thebald 'who led fully a life of asceticism: he persevered in numerous vigils, prayers, supplications, lived in absolute

poverty, trying his body by fasts and difficult works'. For a long time he was a toy in the demons' hands, so much so that one day he asked God for the power to perform miracles. God suggested he submit his judgment to the discernment of a holy hermit. Our 'athlete' gave in and went, as had many others before him, to ask of the elder the ritual question, 'Teach me the way to salvation'. The holy man, knowing him well, simply sent him to the nearest town to buy supplies. The monk was so embarrassed he did not dare make the purchase himself, for fear of losing his reputation. Instead, he asked some laymen he knew to do it for him. When the monk returned with the provisions, the elder surprised him by saying: 'Take it all, go to your cell and while praying eat a loaf of bread and a pound of meat, drink a pint of wine each day—then come back in ten days.' Extremely vexed, the brother left whining, but he obeyed the elder's request. And God, heeding his repentance and humility, offered solace. The monk came to understand the motive which led him to live as he had—without good judgment. He thanked God and recognized the truth of the Prophet's sentence: 'All man's acts of justice are like a dirty cloth' (Is 64:5) (Nau, 641). A salutary conversation was granted in exchange for the manifestation of inquiry and obedience to a spiritual father, for it is true, according to another apophthegm in the same collection, that 'if anyone calls on God with all his heart and goes to seek advice from a man about his thoughts, the man answers—or rather God does—telling him what is right through this intermediary. For He who opened the jaw of Balaam's ass answers even if the inquirer is an unworthy sinner' (Nau, 592/50).

OBEYING THE WORD

The unveiling of thoughts is always teamed with obedience. Each calls for the other; they belong to the same movement, to the same method or spiritual therapy. As a first move, the disciple comes to show certain inclinations to his father; then, by renouncing them, in the conciliating—yet not frustrating—

light of fatherly judgment, he finds his own freedom. Then, someday, he in turn accedes to the charism of discernment.

In the East as well as in the West, the novice's initiation invariably begins with the renunciation of one's own will, that is, all desires, varied and contradictory, successfully called forth in one's heart. 'The concern and principal aim of the abba's teaching, when in charge of young novices,' writes John Cassian, 'a teaching which will allow the young monk to rise later to the highest summit of perfection, will be to teach him first of all to master his will' (*Instit.*, IV, 8). Dorotheos of Gaza echoes him from Palestine. In his admirable *Discourses* for beginners, he says: 'Each time we cling obstinately to our own will. . . while thinking everything is going beautifully, we set traps for ourselves and do not know that we are going to our ruination.'

It is evident that such obedience is but remotely related to the so-called sociological obedience which necessarily characterizes any relationship between a brother and his mentor within a human group. Whenever the elders speak of obedience, what is today called the 'common good' never appears on the horizon. They consider only the personal well-being of the brother who, facing his father, submits to training in obedience as he would to spiritual therapy. It is, above all, a way to internal freedom and spiritual maturation. That is why this training demands a great deal and seems, at times, to go past the bounds of what we know to be reasonable within the normal relationships between inferior and superior in the service of the common good. This apparent excess can be understood only in the light of the psychological and spiritual development it was designed to set in motion. Some borderline cases simply set up a sort of shock-therapy that only a father can impose upon his own son, not only because he is supposed to know him better than anyone else, but above all because the son trusts him totally and feels loved, without limits, without hesitation, as only God can love his children. (We shall come back to this point later on.)

Obedience will therefore go to some excess. Even if the

abba appears unreasonable and tries his son's patience in a stupid way (Nau, 631), or if he orders dangerous feats, such as catching and binding a hyena. (John, 1), or a painful trial, such as putting one's hand into the fire (Chaine, 270),¹⁴ the novice will try to obey the order given. The last example serves the father in testing the docility of a brother who has come to confide himself to the mercy of his fatherhood: 'Make me your son so that I may learn near you.' In other circumstances the disciple will even risk his life, for 'only obedience unto death allows recognition of the true monk' (J, 752).¹⁵

To obey is to be sure of acceding to God's will. In practice true obedience dispenses the brother from all concern about the commandments, because it guarantees conformity with God's wishes: 'If someone trusts an elder and obeys him, he must no longer be concerned with God's commandments, but abandon all his self-will to his spiritual father, for by always obeying him he will not expose himself to sin before God' (Nau, 290).

Obedience thus becoming the only norm, renunciation of one's own will causes God's will to appear in everything that happens. The one who obeys is free from all care and worry. He becomes *amerimnos*, without care. 'He who has a spiritual father is relieved through him of all worry' (Guy, p. 418, no. 8).¹⁶ 'Be without care,' writes Barsanuphius to one of his correspondents, 'if you want to do God's work, and I will carry the burden' (Barsanuphius, 253).

The command given by the spiritual father is often called a 'blessing'. For the father's word which allows a son to act in one way or another brings at the same time the power to succeed. 'This is what you must remember until death: do not do the least or greatest thing without consulting the spiritual father who lives with you: do not leave your cell without his permission; do not drink water before he has uttered a prayer; do not eat a piece of fruit until he has made the sign of the cross over it; do not touch a meal until you have said: "Bless this, Father"; do not put water or oil into the pot without having said the same thing. At night, do not lay down

till you have bowed profoundly to him and taken leave' (K, 298).¹⁷ The entire life of the disciple is steeped in the father's blessings and, through them, in God's strength. It should not be surprising, then, that obedience succeeds in accomplishing miracles. A special apophthegm has been preserved to tell of a resurrection attributed to obedience, although another brother thought he had obtained it by his asceticism: 'It is because of your brothers' obedience that this man has been raised up' (Nau, 294).

Revealing one's thoughts to the father provokes a discerning response or word. This, in turn, must be accepted in total obedience. The brother who renounces all his personal desires to espouse the light springing from his elder's counsel unfailingly espouses God's will contained in it. In so doing, he is purified from his own wishes, liberated from their pull; he is clothed with God's power which in turn allows him to act effectively and to help others in their good judgment.

IN THE IMAGE OF GOD: GENTLENESS AND TENDERNESS

The word of itself is not enough. As important, and perhaps even more important, is the father's example which leaves its imprint on the son. At worse, the word could come from an acquired knowledge. It could also lead to a misunderstanding if the disciple were naive or inexperienced. But example never misleads. It is a *tupos*, and enough to imitate if one is to be schooled in daily concrete practice.

The fathers often recall the necessity of example. Pachomius' disciples were anxious to do good works after listening to him. But they remembered that 'even when silent, Pachomius made his actions a discourse' (Psenhaisios, 1). According to others, the word always retains its ambiguity; example alone is effective. So it seemed to Abba Sisoës, who answered someone asking for a word: 'Why do you insist on my speaking idly? Do what you see' (Sisoës, 46). There are also situations in which the excessive attachment of a disciple to his father's words become suspect to Abba Poemen: One day, Abbot

Serinus, accompanied by his disciple Isaac, went to see Poemen and asked: 'What must I do for Isaac who listens willingly to me?' Poemen answered: 'If you want to be helpful to him, you must show him virtue through your behavior, for he who depends on words alone does not profit from them. But if through your action you show him virtue, he will be marked' (PE, IV, 38, 3).¹⁸

In a letter to one of his charges, Barsanuphius underlines the importance of the son's attention to his father's behavior. A curious exegesis of Genesis 30:37-40, provides the opportunity. We must be bound securely to the holy fathers, and through their examples, their teachings, their sufferings, their beautiful life, we will be filled with compunction before God. Indeed Jacob's ewes saw the rods in the water and conceived lambs in the rods' likeness. If we imprint on our mind the fathers' examples in order to act in the same manner, it will not be long before we walk alongside them' (Barsanuphius, 393). From a father's way of life a mysterious influence emanates, an influence more powerful than what he says. 'Teach by deeds and by word what must be practised,' writes Dorotheos of Gaza to superiors in his monasteries, 'but most of all by your deeds, for examples are much more efficacious. Be their model even in physical works, if you are able, and if you are too weak, teach them by the goodness of your soul and the fruits of the Spirit listed by the Apostle [Gal 5:22-23]: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and control over all passions' (Dorotheos of Gaza, *Letter 2*, 184).

The virtues mentioned by Dorotheos, following St Paul, are characteristic of the New Testament. They are already, through the father's example, outflowings of the world to come, secret but powerful energies which reshape the hearts confiding in him. These virtues can be summarized by gentleness and mercy, two concrete terms for love in God's image. Ancient monastic literature swarms with examples—all of great force. Forbearance sometimes comes close to being a weakness and can only be grasped and justified insofar as the image of God

the Father in heaven is perceptible behind it.

Barsanuphius attests to this explicitly to a brother reluctant to importune him with his questions: 'If God were disturbed or bothered by the requests he receives, the saints would be too.' On the contrary, 'these latter, when they are questioned, rejoice, being perfect as their Father is perfect' (Barsanuphius, 484). There are even better examples, and their profusion attests that, as God bears with man patiently without punishing his negligence, so the father bears with and overlooks his son's thoughtlessness. 'After God I have spread my wings over you till this day,' writes Barsanuphius to a young brother, a scatter-brain. 'I bear your burdens and your misconduct, your scorn of my teachings and your thoughtlessness. I have seen and covered all that, just as God sees and overlooks our faults, waiting for you to do penance' (Barsanuphius, 239).

Applications are legion: forbearance and gentleness are the most striking signs of God's presence in the father. We would do well at this time to quote the little Directory composed by Dorotheos of Gaza to remind superiors how they must correct their brothers. Love always prevails, nothing must shock, for a 'severe heart' and the 'fruits of mercy' go together. Do not be angry about errors If reproach is necessary, take the right attitude and wait for a propitious time. Do not be overconcerned with little faults, as if you were a severe judge. Do not always reprimand; it is insufferable, and such a habit leads to insensitivity and contempt If a brother resists you and this troubles you at the time, hold your tongue so as not to say anything in anger May your own frailty make you sympathetic to your brother. Pray for the opportunity to forgive, so that you too may obtain God's forgiveness for more serious and numerous sins' (Dorotheos of Gaza, *Letter 2*, 184-85).

This text summarizes admirably a tradition which goes back to the origins of life in the desert. John Cassian relates the example of a father who, faced with the impudence of a disobedient son, did not snub him but was satisfied to grieve in his heart, pondering the word in Philipians 2:6 and 8, in

which Jesus is represented as obedient till death (*Inst.*, XII, 28). Another brother who—as everyone knew—spent each night with a woman in a nearby village, was not immediately reprimanded by his father, in spite of the grumbling of the other disciples, unable to understand such a scandalous patience. The father intervened later at a very propitious time and brought about the conversion of the culprit. To those inquiring about the unusually long delay, the father answered: 'I saw Satan holding our brother by the hand and leading him into the world, but I patiently held his other hand for fear that a reproach would drive him faster into the world where the devil was leading him. When God thought it right to save his creature, then we took our brother's other hand and brought him back safe and sound' (PE, IV, 48, 1-11).

Thus the father does not brutally oppose sin. His first reaction is akin to God's: sorrow, of course, but above all patience and mercy; he resorts to wiles to administer reproach in a discreet and round-about way, to spare the brother's feelings. If the father himself is involved and his own teaching has been scorned, his attitude does not vary. Abba Romanos, for instance, recalls at the time of his death that he never told any of the brothers to do something without first making up his mind not to get angry should his orders not be carried out (Romanos, 1). In another case, the father accompanies his son into sin, as it were, by pretending that he has experienced an identical temptation. The aim, as always, is to save the disciple by any means (Nau, 44).

Such condescension, however, is never weakness. It does not surrender to sin nor is it ever its ally. A strange apophthegm preserved by Amélineau in a coptic series unites in the same striking image the double demand of firmness and gentleness. The words are from the great Macarius. It is not possible, he asserts, 'to give birth to spiritual sons in the way Elijah begot Elisha or Paul begot Timothy and Onesimus', if the father is not in a state of 'kindness and gentleness'. He must be in his own person 'the image and likeness of the true

shepherd, the real master, whose body is marked by blows, nails, and lance . . . all endured of his own volition and with great gentleness'. To be the true image of his father, the disciple must also 'bear on his cheeks the traces of the fingers of his master and *hegumenos* [abbot] . . . with great patience, without complaint' (Amélineau, 177, 11). The marks on the son's face could only be—if we interpret it correctly—those of the slap administered by the father, which in no way compromises the image of God's fatherhood if it results from a true love.

FRIENDSHIP

All that has been said so far finds its full meaning in the light of love, the source of the relationship between father and son. Ancient monastic literature, we know, always remained reticent about any obvious intimacy between brothers, but Barsanuphius makes an explicit exception in the case of the friendship between a father and his son: The father's love for their children is one thing, the brothers' love for their brothers is another. The spiritual fathers' love for their children is not at all carnal or harmful, for they are secure in their spirituality and, by either deeds or words, they are always attentive to the young, whatever their needs may be. And while loving them, they do not hide their weaknesses. Since because of his love your father does not hide your faults, it appears that his love for you is of a spiritual nature (Barsanuphius, 342).

Saint Anthony, in his letters often overflowing with tenderness, had already introduced an analogous distinction: 'My sons, my love is not of this earth, it is a spiritual love, according to God' (*Letter 3*, 1).¹⁹ That his spiritual children may grasp the quality of his love for them is the very object of his prayer: 'O, my sons in the Lord, day and night I beg my Creator, through the Spirit poured into me, to open your heart that you may understand my love for you' (*Letter 4*, 12).

Since the father knows and loves his children for what they are in the eyes of God, he does not have to know their

birthname. This is the case for Joseph of Panephrisis, who did not bother to learn the name of a disciple who has been living with him for two years (Joseph of Panephrisis, 9). St Anthony, too, frequently, let it be known in his letters that he greeted his disciples not by their 'mortal, passing, or ephemeral name,' but by their true spiritual name which he alone is likely to know, their name as Israel's sons according to the Spirit (3, 1; 4, 1-8; 5, 1; 6, 1.3; 7).

In the warmth of this paternal love, little by little, in the course of the years, a strong friendship develops between father and son. A touching example is given at the death of St Anthony whom 'everyone wanted for a father' (*Vita*, 81), in a description left by Saint Athanasius: 'When he was done speaking, his disciples kissed him. He stretched out his feet and, looking fondly at his companions rejoicing in their presence, he remained abed, happiness showing in his face' (*Vita*, 103). In the end, Anthony had no secret left to confide to his closest children. He was asked to speak of his ecstasies. He did not refuse. His biographer writes: 'He expressed himself as a father who cannot hide anything from his children' (*Vita*, 66). Graces received are not the only things the father shares; frequently he tells them of his own temptations so that he can comfort his sons. 'I, brothers, weak as I am, used to do that. You who are watchful will be under God's care' (Barsanuphius, 512). Such intimacy transcends death, as in the case of the father who shrouded his son and asked: 'Are you all right my child, or is there a little something left to do?' Thereupon the deceased answered, 'All is well, Father; you have fulfilled your promise' (Nau, 15).

The sons' love answers the father. 'Be your father's joy,' recommends Arsenius, 'so that when you are on your way to the Lord, he in turn can be your joy' (Arsenius, 35). In some cases this love is the best guarantee of monastic life, as in Amma Talis' monastery, where sixty young religious 'loved her so much that there was no need for a key at the gate, as was customary elsewhere, so taken were they by the amma's love' (*Lausiak History*, 138).

The son's love for his father requires judgment, however. Too great an assiduity might hide some secret ambition: 'Do not be too familiar with your abba and do not go see him too often because these encounters might bring a lack of constraint and you would begin to desire the first place' (Nau, 36). Moreover, this love must always be accompanied by fear, for it is not an easy and superficial tenderness which the son is entitled to expect from his father, but the firmness of intervention as well if the need arise. The priest Isidore says: 'The disciples must love as fathers those who are truly their masters, and fear them as leaders, that fear remains along with love, but their love is not shadowed by it' (Isidore the Priest, 5).

PRAYER

In this dialogue of love, the most effective word is the one pronounced before God by the father about the son he has borne to life in prayer. Intercession is the abba's task *par excellence*. A greek apophthegm of the Nau collection has retained an abbreviated but admirable specimen of this prayer: A holy abbot, father of a monastery, excelled in all the virtues, and above all in humility and kindness. He was also merciful, sympathetic, and surpassed many others in love. This man prayed to God as follows: 'Lord, I am a sinner, but I hope that in your mercy I shall be saved. In your goodness, Master, I beg you not to separate me from my community, not even in the world to come. But, in your goodness, grant them your kingdom along with me' (Nau, 449).

He who prays for a brother is the first to benefit from this prayer: A brother went to visit an elder gifted with discernment and asked: 'Pray for me, Father, because I am weak.' And the elder answered him: 'One of the fathers once said that whoever takes oil in his hand to rub a sick man is the first to benefit from the anointing performed by his own hand. So it is with whoever prays for a sorrowing brother; he benefits from it even before his brother because his intention was love' (Nau, 635). **The first effect of prayer is not always to relieve a sorrowing brother. On the contrary, the**

prayer and blessing of the spiritual father often sets in motion a test from which the son can profit. Ammonas is an ancient witness to this conviction (*Letters* IX, 1-2; XIII, 5). It is also attested to in an apophthegm of the coptic collection published by Amélineau; this apophthegm uses an eloquent image to teach us how effective for the son the father's prayer may be: A brother asked Abba Macarius: 'Teach me what it is to live in submission.' And he answered: 'Just as the wheel, when it grinds wheat, removes the chaff, and the wheat becomes pure bread, so it is with you my son. Your father is the wheel and you are the wheat. If you listen to him, he will pray to the Lord on your behalf; he will remove from your path Satan's chaff, and instead of being pure bread you shall become a son of God' (Amélineau, 126, 14).

It is in the heat of trial that the spiritual father's prayer becomes most effective. Macarius attests to this concerning his spiritual father's prayer: 'The remedies of my lord, Abba Anthony, are not carnal, but the Paraclete's power is at work in his prayer' (Amélineau, 120, 14). When tempted, the disciple in turning to God often claims the support of his father's prayers and leans on them in the form, we might say, of an ejaculatory prayer, well known in the monastic environment and famous for its efficacy: 'Because of my Father's prayer, deliver me!' (Nau, 293); 'God of virtues, by my Father's prayer, free me!' (Ammoun, 3).

The spiritual father never grows weary of the prayer. It pursues the son even into sin. On learning that his disciple Abraham had fallen, Abba Sisoës got up, stretched his hands toward heaven and said: 'God, whether you want it or not, I will leave you no rest until you heal him' (Sisoës, 12). This prayer might appear daring, but it springs spontaneously from the certainty that God will answer the spiritual father's prayer because it is the channel by which all graces come to the son.

This prayer accompanies the son even on his death bed: 'Abba, I see the powers of darkness coming to me but your prayers drive them back' (Nau, 23). And even after death, the father's prayers keep on helping his son. Blessed Paul the

Simple learned this in a vision when one of his recently deceased disciples, whose life had not been a model of edification, came joyously to meet him saying: 'Your prayers, Father, have touched the holy Mother of God who loves you very much. In turn she prevailed on the Saviour who has set me free, for I was still bound in the chains of my sin' (Nau, 599). The father's prayer remains effective even when he himself is dead. In Palestine, Abba Nicholas had predicted to Antiochus, a disciple who was blind, that he would recover his sight the week after his death. And it did happen while Antiochus was seated grieving near Nicholas's tomb (K 187).

To conclude these testimonies on the spiritual father's prayer, it would be appropriate to quote Barsanuphius' note to one of his sons, Andrew, who had asked the father to pray for him: I am letting you know that, even before you asked, I had presented you to the holy, adorable, consubstantial, and vivifying Trinity, without beginning, in a presentation which will preserve you from all evil. But I do not want you to be ignorant that there is another [presentation] more formidable, more ineluctable and awesome, more desirable and lovable, more honorable and glorious . . . He is referring, of course, to the Last Judgment, when each spiritual father will be invited to speak and to present his sons: Each of the saints, bringing to God the sons he has saved, will announce with a resounding voice, with the greatest of ease, to the astonishment of the holy angels and all the heavenly hosts: 'Here I am with all the little children God gave me' (Barsanuphius, 117). In this fashion, the father's prayer accompanies the disciple from the time he is taken in charge until in eternity he stands before the Judge's throne.

SONS BECOMING FATHERS

The father's fundamental role in the primitive monastic experience must not allow us to forget that it was passing and transitory. If it is essential to speak only to one spiritual father and not to several at the same time (Amélineau, 127, 5), it is just as important not to be so dazzled by one's father as to

forget Him in whose name the father speaks. When a brother asked to leave monastic life because the famous abba he sought did not take care of him, he was reproached as follows: 'It is just that God made me forget you, for you were depending not on Him but on me.' Any cult of personality is excluded in monastic life. The father is useless if he is not transparent to God's actions.

The relationship between father and son is expected to progress. The day comes when the son can break away from his father. It is the most evident result of this fatherhood. Moreover, the fathers recognize that a son is sometimes much more advanced than they are. Abba Carion admitted this: 'I took greater pains than my son Zacharias, yet I have not yet reached his level of humility or knowledge' (Carion, 1). Barsanuphius advised his son to pray for him that he might receive the Holy Spirit, for He is the 'Great Pilot' who can, in the end, really save and direct, and it would be wrong to reserve too much esteem for the spiritual father (Barsanuphius, 196).

In several well-known instances, the time came when roles were reversed: the son became the father of his spiritual father and vice-versa. New heights of love and humility are reached this way: An abba from Rome recalled that there was an elder who had a good disciple. Because of some narrowness of mind, he chased him out. The brother remained seated outside and, when the elder opened the door and found him still seated, he bowed to him saying: 'O, father, the humility of your patience has won over my narrowness of mind. Come in; from now on you are the elder and father and I shall be the younger and disciple' (An Abba of Rome, 2; see Nau, 451).

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'To remain in submission to one's spiritual father, and to renounce one's own will' constitute a truly spiritual technique, an evangelical path embracing the total monastic experience. Ancient literature gives its conditions precisely and praises its advantages. The literature compares this way to other types of

monastic life, but most of the time the comparison turns to its advantage. According to Abba Joseph the Theban: three actions are worthy in the eyes of the Lord: if, when a man is ill and temptations plague him, he welcomes them gratefully; second, if all pure works are done in God's presence and nothing human remains; third, when submission to one's spiritual father is present and all that is self-will is renounced. And the last of these holds an eminent crown (Joseph the Theban, 1).

An apophthegm by Abba Rufus contains an amplified version of this. It ends in a lyrical flight quite unusual in the language of the fathers, habitually so restrained: O obedience, mother of all virtues! O obedience that discovers the kingdom! O obedience that opens the heavens, which from earth allows men's ascent! O obedience, nourishment of all the saints who have suckled its milk and through it have become perfect! O obedience, living with the angels! (Rufus, 2; see Nau, 296).

A mysterious force springing from the relationship in which father and son face each other in a mutual casting off of all desires, obedience thus reveals God's will and gives new life to whoever, through his father's word, lets it mould him. And the father who, in his transparency, is the humble instrument of this mystery deserves indeed the name of *kalogiros*, since divine Beauty becomes fertile in him through the sons it gives him. This is a blessed ministry, thanks to which he comes to resemble God Himself.

Translated by Monique Coyne

NOTES

1. Palladius, *The Lausiaca History* (trans. Robert T. Meyer; *Ancient Christian Writers*, 34; Washington, D.C.; London, 1965).
2. The names followed by a number refer to the alphabetic collection of apophthegmata edited by Cotelier and reproduced by Migne, PG 65.
3. Cited according to the French translation by the monks of Solesmes (1971), based on the edition of Nicodème l'Hagorite (2nd ed. by Scoina; Volo, 1960) and improved by reference to various manuscripts.
4. Ed. Nau in the *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* (1907-1913), cited according to the French enumeration of J. C. Guy in *Textes de spiritualité orientale*, 1 (Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1966).
5. Ed. Regnault in SCh 109 (Paris, 1963).
6. Anonymous Series (*Revue de l'Orient Chrétien*, 1907-1913) numbered according to J. C. Guy in *Recherches sur la tradition grecque des Apophthegmata Patrum* (Bruxelles, 1962) reproduced by L. Regnault in *Sentences des Pères du Désert*, 2 (Solesmes, 1970).
7. PG 26:837-976.
8. Ammonas (ed. Nau) in *Patrologia Orientalis*, 10 (Paris, 1916) 567-616.
9. Ed. J. C. Guy, SCh 109 (Paris, 1965).
10. *Conférences* (ed. Pichery) in SCh 42, 54, and 64 (Paris, 1955-1959).
11. *Collection éthiopienne* (ed. V. Arras) in *Corpus scriptorum christianorum orientalium*, 238-39 (Louvain, 1963).
12. Ed. J. C. Guy in *Recherches sur la tradition grecque des Apophthegmata Patrum* (Bruxelles, 1962).
13. Apophthegmata translated from the Coptic by Amélineau, *Annales du Musée Guimet*, 25 (1894).
14. The manuscript of the Coptic version of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, with a Greek Text and a French translation edited by

15. M. Chaine (Cairo, 1960).
Unedited manuscript Sinai 448, cited according to the French translation by L. Regnault in *Sentences des Pères du Désert*, 3 (Solesmes, 1976).
16. *Collection grecque anonyme*, edited by Guy in *Recherches de Sciences Religieuses*, 50 (1960), cited according to the pagination in *Textes de spiritualité orientale*, 1 (Bellefontaine, 1966).
17. Unedited manuscript Coislin 283, cited according to the French translation by L. Regnault in *Sentences des Pères du Désert*, 3.
18. *Pavlos Evergetinos*, ed. V. Matthaiov (Athens, 4 vols., 1957-1966).
19. *Letters de S. Antoine* (trans. A. Louf) in *Cahiers de spiritualité* (Bellefontaine, 1976). An English translation has been published as *The Letters of St Antony* (Oxford: Fairacres Press).